

Mark 1:1-8
December 6, 2020
"Christ, the Way"
Randy Smith

In my college and post-college years I had many opportunities to go to a lot of places, and I went to a lot of them. There really was something special about that time in my life, when I had basically nothing, almost no money, but -- for that very reason -- was so free, to just pick up and go.

Maybe some of you had that same experience of that time in your lives?

My purpose in sharing about that time in my life goes far beyond nostalgia. My point is that, back in those days, where I laid my head to rest at night really didn't matter to me. I never worried much about it. No matter how *spartan* the accommodation, it was okay. In fact, it was kind of **fun** -- to face whatever **challenge** a particular place presented!

But that was *then* and this is *now*. Now, I am picky about where I lay my head at night. *Now*, I spend hours on Tripadvisor carefully researching every possible place I might be staying. High ratings. Not a trace of smoke. Zero reports of bed bugs! Complimentary breakfast. Good location, etc.

So, nowadays, *although* I have learned how to keep myself "**safe**" from the **challenges** I once upon a time gladly faced, I'm not sure I'm having as much **fun**.

When we are introduced to John the Baptist in Mk. 1 -- the figure who Mark, along with the other three Gospel writers, considers to be the real "**beginning**" of the Good News of Jesus Christ" -- John is inviting people, you might say, to have more fun in life! He has chosen to launch his ministry, after all, out in the **Judean wilderness**, a large expanse of bleak desert hills and crags running east of Jerusalem, through the so-called "West Bank", down to the Jordan River and the Dead Sea. This was the area, of course, into which Jesus is driven by the Spirit following his baptism by John, to do "spiritual combat" with the devil. And this makes sense because the wilderness was *considered* to be a place of significant **danger**, not only from wild beasts roaming around there but also because it was *believed* to be the **haunt** of all manner of *evil spirits*.

This has where John the Baptist has set up shop -- some 21 miles from Jerusalem (cf. walking from downtown Greenville to Fountain Inn) -- "proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins". Which, for me, immediately raises **two big questions**: one, **why** does John launch a ministry where no one normally goes (180 degrees counter to all marketing logic)? And **why** in the world

do people go to all the trouble to go out there, into the wilderness, in response to John's ministry?

On the first question, I think John did this in order to **challenge** people to **leave behind** what was *known*, and *comfortable*, and **safe** about their lives, and meet him in an **unknown**, **uncomfortable**, and frankly **unsafe** place. **Why?** Because he wants them to make **an intentional break** from their *routine*, almost a kind of "pilgrimage". Across the history of the Church, "pilgrimages" or "retreats" have been a well-established practice, because they give us human beings -- who so easily settle into routines which tend to protect us from challenges in life we would rather not deal with -- a **chance to see things** -- the world, other people, the real character of our relationships with other people, and, *most importantly*, see **ourselves** -- in a *fresh*, and hopefully **more truthful** -- even if **less comfortable** -- way.

I've been reading an insightful, and delightful book entitled **Credulous**, written by a young woman named Andrea Lingle, who is UM pastor's wife in N.C., mother of three, and a self-described "lay theologian". In one chapter she describes a **pilgrimage** experience which involved miles of walking and **talking** with fellow pilgrims which, she says, suited her just fine because, as she puts it, "I am an *inveterate chatter-bucket*". After several days of this, the leader of the pilgrimage, a man named Larry, turned to her and, she says, "spoke a profound truth into my life: 'A few minutes of **silence** every day,' he said, 'would be good for you'." And then she *adds*, "I *think* he spoke this in love, and not simple *desperation*."

But, **why** did -- according to Mark -- "the *whole* Judean countryside and *all* the people of Jerusalem" respond to John's ministry the way they did? This, for me, is a harder question.

We would be *wrong*, e.g., to imagine that they were a group of people feeling *extra*-burdened by their **everyday sins**, and in need of some *special* assurance that they were forgiven. I think the abiding "spiritual" issue for the Jewish people in 1st-c. AD Judea was way bigger than that. They are wondering where God is in the midst of their suffering, as a people, under the subjection of yet another pagan power, this time Rome, for the last almost 100 years. Their **historical memory** is *profoundly* long and clear: they are the Covenant People of God, living in the land of God's Promise, wherein they were *intended*, in *obedience* to God and God's ways, to **flourish**, in order to **witness** to all the other peoples of the world as to *who* God is, and *what* God has designed for human life-together.

But that is **not** their reality. And they do not understand exactly why. And John, through his ministry, seems to be promising them a **fresh start**: "Come out," he says, "to the Jordan, to the **waters** through which you once crossed into the Land of Promise, be washed clean of all that has gone before, and re-enter the Land again, looking now **only forward** to what God has in store for you!" Which is why John tells the people (1:8), " I have baptized you with water; but **he** will baptize you with the Holy Spirit".

Which is all to reinforce the idea that this is only "the **beginning** of the Good News of Jesus Christ". Something much, **much** bigger lies ahead.

Leave behind, John says, all you've *known* and become *habituated* to, even *though* -- or maybe especially *because* -- it isn't giving you much in the way of **peace**, or much in the way of **hope**, and **come out** from your everyday lives into the **wilderness**, where you can **see and understand** things in a new and different way, and so go back into your everyday lives as *changed* people, now **aware of**, and **open to** new possibilities for your lives.

It's **critically important** to understand that this is the **essence** of what John -- and Jesus, just 11 verses later -- mean when they call the people to "**repentance**", the *literal* meaning of the word "**repent**" being "**change your mind**". Change your mind: your *thinking* about things. Your *attitude* towards things. Your *prejudices* -- literally, your pre-judgements about things. It's critically important we *understand* this, just so that we'll understand what John, and then Jesus, have come on the scene saying is the **central thrust** of what they are all about.

But it's **especially** important **we**, as Christians, and as the whole Church in America **in our time**, understand that this is what God is **always** calling the Covenant People to do -- to **repent**, to be willing to **change our minds**. Which is, I hope we can all agree, what our whole **society** is presently desperately lacking the capacity to do, and so is in *desperate* need of -- given the seemingly **perpetual division, suspicion, contempt** and even **violence** we as a society have been living through, *especially* over the last generation.

Just think: young people such as Jessica Bilcliff have no living memory of an American society, the most *prominent* characteristic of which is a widely shared *vision* of the **common good**, and the capacity of Americans to **change their minds sufficiently** to be able to work together toward achieving that vision.

No living memory.

Ah, but how **do** you **change your mind**? It starts, maybe, with *wanting* to, or *praying* for that desire. And *then* it involves **taking a break from** the **places** -- which are now likely not physical places but rather cable news channels, or the social media and

websites -- we frequent or, i.e., leaving the "**Echo Chambers**" in which most Americans seem to choose nowadays to live, wherein all the opinions and perspectives expressed are the same as **our own**, thus always **reinforcing** us in the **rightness** of our thinking -- which, of course, does *nothing* to **enlarge** our understanding of our world and the people we *inescapably* have to share it with -- *and* also makes us **ever more rigid** in our views. Which leads in turn to people living in confusion, and fear, over all the white-hot, "hot-button" issues troubling us so severely in this era.

So, I wonder: can we as the Church be of any **help** here? After all, we are the ones who are supposed to be "experts" in the **repentance business**, aren't we? In fact, shouldn't we be *leading the way* in learning how to change **our** minds, so that we might help others do the same?

So, I wonder if we as the Church can learn how to use *various* tools and means, such as what is referred to as the practice of "**Courageous Conversations**", to help *ourselves* be always open to changing our minds -- **repenting** -- on a *continual* basis, as we seek, *intentionally, respectfully, and humbly* to **listen** to the stories of those whose **views**, and **life experiences**, are very different from ours, and so accept the **challenge** of coming **to see things** -- the world, other people, the real character of our relationships with other people, and, *most importantly*, see **ourselves** -- in a *fresh*, and hopefully **more truthful** -- even if **less comfortable** -- way.

My *final* question about this morning's Scripture reading is "Where in Mark's Gospel do we find a **Christmas** story?" I mean, there *is* none. No angels, no shepherds, no Wise Men. No Bethlehem, no stable and animals. No manger. None. As we see, Mark begins his Gospel with the ministry of John the Baptist, and goes immediately to the ministry of the -- *grown up!* -- Jesus.

Maybe Mark is trying to tell us: "Look, there's **no time** for all that *sentimental*, "the little Lord Jesus asleep on the hay" stuff. Christmas -- by definition! -- means it's time *now* for **strong, true words**, and **powerful, impactful works**. It's time now to **repent** -- to **change** your mind -- and get a **fresh start**, and get **going**.

So...go! Use this Advent season to ask God to show you where in your life you are most in need of repentance -- most in need of changing your mind -- to "prepare the way" for God to make the most fruitful use of your life.